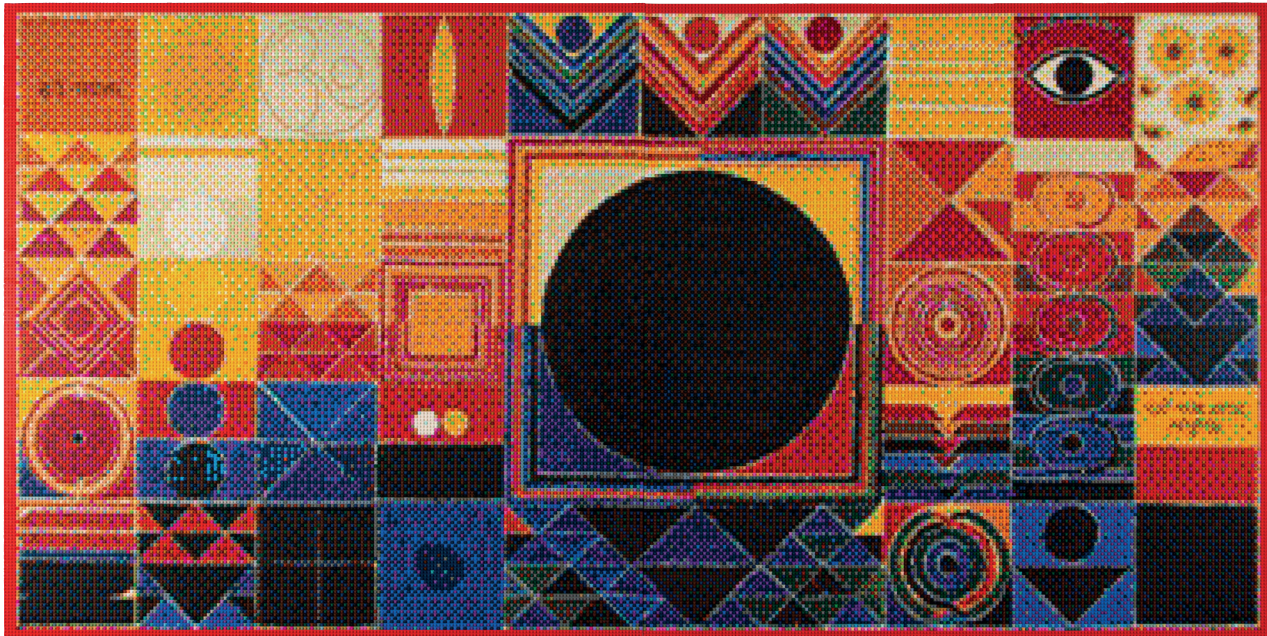


# Of Play & Power

Artist Ai Weiwei takes us through his first show in India.

By SHREYA AJMANI



*Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation), 2025 by Ai Weiwei; toy bricks*

This is my first exhibition in India,” Ai Weiwei says. It is a simple statement, but one that arrives long overdue and highly anticipated in a career defined by constant movement across borders, media, and political contexts. Presented at Nature Morte, New Delhi, from January 15 to February 22, the untitled exhibition is part of India Art Fair’s parallel programme. Though compact in scale, the show functions as a condensed meditation on the concerns that have shaped Ai’s work over nearly three decades.

“Although there are only a dozen of my artworks,” he explains, “it covers several key points that trace almost 30 years of my creative activity.” The exhibition is not conceived as a survey, but as a set of intersections: between past, present, cultural inheritance, and contemporary language.

India, for Ai, has long existed more as an idea than a lived place. His earliest encounters were literary rather than visual, mediated through his father’s library. “I encountered Indian poetry only,” he says. “I only know Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry, because my father was a

poet, and since childhood I saw Tagore’s books on our shelves.” Ai speaks of a quiet respect for the poet, particularly in light of Tagore’s visit to mainland China in 1924 and the cultural exchange that followed.

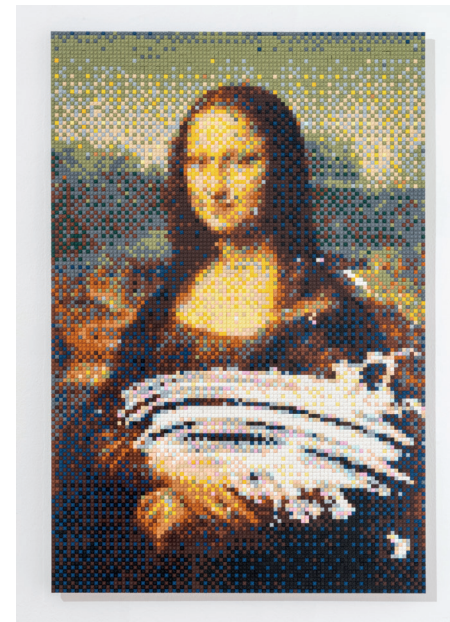
Over time, other forms entered his field of vision. Indian miniature painting left a strong impression, as did architecture, particularly temple sculpture. Ai describes these encounters with a sculptor’s attentiveness to the body. “The temples in India contain sculptures of human bodies that have in fact influenced sculptural traditions in Chinese Buddhist art,” he says. “The sculptures in India are more lively, sensual, and vivid, reaching a level that no other sculptural tradition in the world has attained.”

“India combines strong rational thinking with enormous sensitivity,” he says, “consistently bringing the consciousness of deities into lived reality.” He frames this as a rare synthesis, one in which metaphysical ideas are neither abstracted nor distanced from everyday experience.

Ai is careful, however, to qualify these observations.



*F.U.C.K., 2024 by Ai Weiwei; buttons and fabric*



*Mona Lisa Smeared in Cream, 2023; toy bricks*

“Of course, my understanding remains very limited,” he insists. The exhibition does not claim authority over Indian art or history; instead, it works through partial knowledge, memory, and interpretation. That position of distance proves generative.

Several works in the exhibition draw on Indian art-historical references, reimagined through materials that have become central to Ai’s practice, most notably toy bricks. “In this exhibition, I attempted to use my usual materials, toy bricks, to re-enact certain classics in Indian art,” he says. The choice is deliberate and strategic. Toy bricks are industrial, modular, and universally recognisable; they carry associations of childhood, repetition, and construction.

“I tried to interpret those enduring classics using the language of today and brighter colours,” he continues. The resulting works resist solemnity, and move between playfulness and restraint. “There is both childlike playfulness and serenity present,” Ai says, adding that this duality resonates with his perception of Indian culture.

Placed within the arc of his broader practice, the exhibition marks a shift in orientation. “This exhibition helped me expand my horizons,” he admits, “and encouraged me to look toward a geographically close country with the largest population, the deepest history, and a society that is currently developing at great speed.” Rather than a conclusion, the show signals an opening, an engagement with a context that has remained largely peripheral in his work until now.

The timing of the exhibition coincides with Ai’s first visit to India, during India Art Fair 2026. Asked how he imagines the country before arriving, he says, “India is a place filled with imagination, rich colours, and deep complexity, shaped by history and tradition.”

During the fair, Ai participated in a panel discussion with Alexandra Munroe, Senior Curator at Large, Global Arts, Guggenheim, and Roobina Karode, Chief Curator at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. The conversation addressed questions that recur throughout Ai’s work, including how objects carry truths that power attempts to erase or conceal. It is a subject he has returned to repeatedly, across media and geographies, without resolving it into a single position.



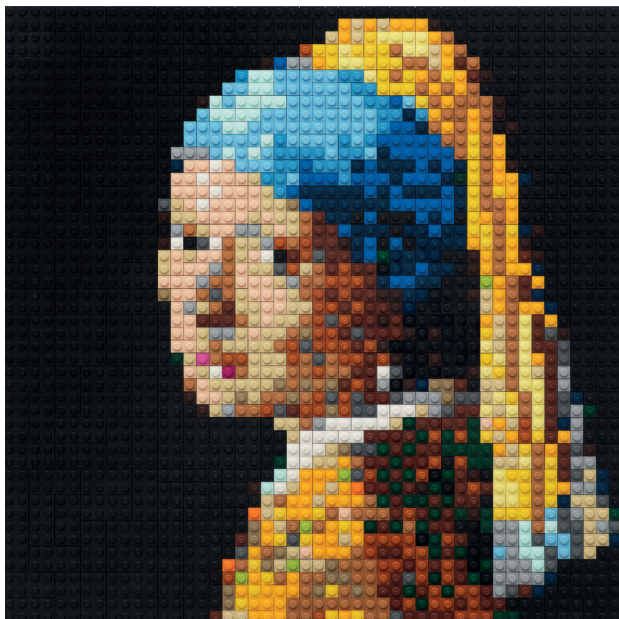
Ai Weiwei

IMAGES: COURTESY AI WEIWEI STUDIO AND GALLERIA CONTINUA; PHOTOGRAPHER (FOR MONA LISA SMEARED IN CREAM): ELA BIALKOWSKA, OKNO STUDIO

IMAGES: COURTESY AI WEIWEI STUDIO, NATURE MORTE, AND GALLERIA CONTINUA



# T A L K I N G P O I N T



Despite changes in context and scale, Ai says the necessity of making art has not diminished. “The urgency to make art is still present,” he says. “Many of my other desires and impulses have weakened, but my urgency to make art has not diminished.”

When asked whether his understanding of his role as an artist has shifted over time, Ai resists the premise altogether. “I have always been sceptical about defining or understanding the role of an artist,” he says. “Very few people can truly call themselves artists, and very few artworks are capable of speaking for an era.” The remark is less self-effacing than it is sceptical of grand claims, including his own.

Time, in his view, does not bring clarity so much as it demands constant re-articulation. “For me, time can only be measured as an illusion,” he says. “Every second requires a new language to mark it, and this language is what people usually call artistic creation.” Art, then, is not a record of time passing, but a response to its instability.

This understanding also informs his resistance to planning. “I do not believe that any art creation can be planned,” Ai says. “Making art is not a rational action; it is a form of correspondence with reality, and reality itself cannot be planned.” The artist’s role, as he sees it, is not to impose order, but to remain in dialogue with conditions as they unfold.

Asked how he would describe the exhibition to an Indian audience, Ai avoids abstraction. “I hope that when they see these artworks, they may sometimes laugh and sometimes contemplate,” he shares. The desired response is neither reverence nor agreement, but fluctuation, between humour and reflection. “And afterward,” he adds, “I would like them to return home and enjoy delicate Indian food.”



Clockwise from left: *Girl with Pearl*, 2022; toy bricks. *Surfing (After Hokusai)*, 2025; toy bricks. *Porcelain Pillar with Refugee Motif*, 2017; porcelain. All artworks by Ai Weiwei

The remark lands lightly, but it clarifies his position. The work does not ask to be consumed as doctrine or symbol. It asks only for attention—brief, open, and unguarded—before life resumes. ■